

Violence and Protests Derail Mexican Elections as Left Divided

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Mexico's latest elections are threatened by drug cartel violence, social protests, and the mass resignation of election officials. The left, which in the past has succeeded in rallying a third or more of the nation's voters for a single party, goes into this election deeply divided, prompting expectations of a win for the ruling party.

A hurricane is barreling down on Baja California threatening to interfere with Mexico's June 7 elections on the peninsula, but the far greater storm is the combination of criminal violence and widespread social protests, which could disrupt and possibly prevent the election in several states.

Already at least 20 pre-candidates, candidates, and campaign managers have been killed while there have been dozens of other violent attacks on other candidates, campaign events, and party offices. Drug cartels are believed to be responsible for the murders of candidates who presumably threatened their interests, further fuelling uncertainty about what the cartels might do on election day.

However, the larger threat to the Mexican government's election plans comes from social and political protest movements. Teachers, indigenous groups, peasant communities, and armed "self-defense" organizations in various states say that Mexico's political system and parties are corrupt and that voters should abstain from participating. Some groups announced plans to disrupt the election altogether.

President Enrique Peña Nieto's government has rebuffed the threats, vowing that voting will continue without disruption and calling for the political parties to assist in ensuring the election take place.

Teacher and Student Protests

The National Coordinating Committee (la CNTE), a militant caucus within the Mexican Teachers Union (el SNTE) which has been leading the resistance to the Education Reform Law passed by the Mexican Congress, has not only called for a boycott of the election, but intends to enforce a boycott in some states.

In several states—Chiapas, Guerrero, Michoacán, Oaxaca, and Zacatecas—teachers have blocked highways, seized toll booths, taken over the district office of National Electoral Institute (INE), and in some areas seized Mexican Petroleum Company (PEMEX) refineries, leading to some conflicts

with the police. Peña Nieto's government agreed to suspend teacher evaluations, which are at the heart of the Education Reform law, and to guarantee the teachers' job security, but teachers continue to protest, demanding that the entire law be rescinded entirely. In Oaxaca, teachers not only seized the INE offices but also burned election materials, in an effort to obstruct the election process.

In some states such as Michoacán, where the government has agreed to negotiate, the teachers have temporarily lifted their siege of the INE. But in other parts of Michoacán, armed "self-defense" organizations (auto-defensas)—some made up of indigenous community members, some organized by wealthy farmers and businessmen, some allegedly linked to the cartels, and some incorporated into the state or federal police—may also work to prevent the election because of their specific grievances.

Protests have been ongoing in Mexico ever since September 2014, when police allegedly cooperating with gangsters, killed six, injured at least 25, and forcibly disappeared 43 students of Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers College in the town of Iguala, Guerrero. Families of the murdered or disappeared students, together with fellow students and teachers burned the town hall and the headquarters of the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) months ago, and since then they have been seizing government buildings and blocking highways protesting what they say is government complicity in the murders, the impunity of the murderers, and the failure of the government to seek justice. Angry over the students' deaths and disappearances and furious over the Education Reform Law, teachers and community activists are attempting to make the election impossible in Guerrero.

Meanwhile, thousands of election officials have resigned to protest racist remarks made by the President of the INE, Lorenzo Córdova. A recording of a telephone conversation by Córdova ridiculing the speech of an indigenous man was released in late May and widely distributed on Twitter and other social media. Córdova apologized, but there were widespread demands for his resignation and thousands refuse to work for him.

The Left Divided

The Mexican left is divided more today than since the early 1980s as nearly 80 million Mexican voters will go to the polls on June 7 to elect 500 federal representatives, nine governors, 641 state legislators, 993 mayors and 16 borough chiefs for Mexico City. Governors are up for reelection in Baja California Sur, Sonora, Nuevo Leon, San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, Michoacán, Guerrero, Campeche.

Four rival leftist parties will be competing for votes—the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the Workers Party (PT), the Citizens Movement (MC), and the Movement for National Regeneration Party (MORENA). Some parties may ally with others, including the two dominant parties: the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) or the National Action Party (PAN). The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), one of the country's important left organizations, remains opposed to elections as always and has joined the call for boycotts.

But the left is fractured largely because the PRD joined President Peña Nieto's Institutional Revolutionary Party's (PRI) Pact for Mexico shortly after his election in 2012. He enticed both the PAN and the PRD as well as other parties to join the pact, creating a semi-national unity government to pass a series of right-wing, pro-business "counter-reforms" in the areas of education, labor, energy, and telecommunications.

The PRD's alliance with the PRI and PAN appalled many on the left, leading to resignations or

desertions to MORENA. Among those who left the PRD are its leading founder and former presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, former Mexico City mayors Alejandro Encinas and Marcelo Ebrard, and most significantly Andrés Manuel López Obrador, another former presidential candidate and a founder of MORENA.

The PRI, which ruled Mexico for 75 years, then lost to the PAN in 2000 and 2006, returned to power in 2012. The PRI currently has a plurality in both the Senate and the House and, according to polls, is expected to be the biggest winner on election day with about a third of the vote. Various polls suggest that the PRI—together with its allies the Green Party (PVEM), the New Alliance Party (PANAL), the party of the teachers union, and the new Social Encounter Party—should win a clear majority in both houses. The conservative PAN is expected to come in second with 25 percent of the vote, while the PRD and MORENA are expected to divide the left vote with about 13 and 10 percent respectively. The PT and MC will get less than five percent each and there is some chance they could lose their ballot status.

Additionally, thousands of pre-marked ballots favoring PRI have been discovered, but the ruling party claims it the revelation is a "dirty trick" by rival parties.

The election has reportedly cost officials 9.3 billion pesos (\$594 million U.S. dollars) to get voters to the polls for various parties and candidates, yet some 40 percent or more of the Mexican electorate may sit out the election, many of them, according to academics studying the campaigns, disgusted by the mud-slinging on the thousands of television advertisements.

While the election is in jeopardy in half a dozen states, the government is likely to continue to spearhead voting, despite sporadic cartel violence and social protests.

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